

## An education that opened up the world

by Wendell Gaa

I haven't paid a visit to my alma mater, Andrews University, in more than a decade now, but the educational experience I gained as a student there will remain with me for life. It came at a time when I needed a school to nourish my mental, physical and spiritual wellbeing and prepare me for the challenges the real world would present.

It was the spring of 1994 and I would be graduating in June from Glendale Adventist Academy (GAA) in sunny Southern California. There I was, a senior high school student with no clear direction of which career path to choose or college to attend.

John Aitken, my religion and drama teacher (and himself an Andrews alumnus), strongly advised me to try out my luck at Andrews. My initial thoughts were a combination of excitement and anxiety. The main question hanging in the air was why would a happy-go-lucky Southern California kid like me want to try studying and living in an environment so different from what I was used to?

I was told I could look forward to frigid winters, icy roads and depressing snowstorms upon moving to Berrien Springs, a lonely rural town out in the middle of nowhere in Southwest Michigan.

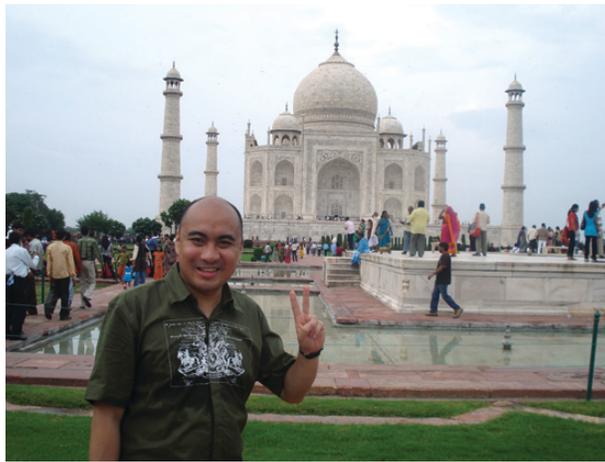
Fortunately, none of the horror stories were enough to intimidate me. Maybe it was my innate urge to go on an adventure, but I also felt a calling from God that this was the school He had destined for me.

The years between 1994 and 1998 when I was an Andrews student were a turning point in my life. It took awhile for me to adjust. Sure enough, there were the harsh winters and the freezing cold, but to my surprise, that became the least of my worries. I soon realized my biggest challenges would not only come from my academic trials, but from the emotional pressure of attempting to fit in and be accepted by my collegiate peers.

Through the power and comfort of God, my prayers for help were soon answered in the form of a select group of professors

and friends who helped me realize I wasn't alone. My first goal at Andrews was to get an education and earn a degree, and secondly, to gain an international network of friends. Happily, I discovered both at Andrews.

This school offered me some of the best professors one could learn from, and teachers who actually cared for both my mental and emotional growth. I will always cherish the journalism classes taught by Morris Brown. He taught me the importance of hard work



Wendell Gaa visiting the Taj Mahal

and determination in pursuing my goals; the value of pursuing the truth at all costs; maintaining objectivity, writing accurately and overcoming my fear of working with people of differing professions.

One of my first news reporting assignments was an interview with Øystein LaBianca, my cultural anthropology teacher, about a scholarship grant he had received from the *National Geographic Society* for an archaeological excavation in Jordan. He expressed amazement and interest in my personal travel stories to Arab nations. It was a wonderful opportunity to talk with a scholar who was also culturally informed about remote and ancient societies outside of the United States.

During my final year at Andrews, the Departments of Behavioral Sciences and Social Work provided two very intelligent and

kind-hearted professors: Duane McBride and Curtis Vanderwaal. Their courses showed me that Andrews could help me learn in both theoretical and practical ways.

That year I was also privileged to reunite with my GAA English teacher, Cara Dalton, who visited the campus for the opening and dedication of the J.N. Andrews sculpture.

On the social side, I developed an international network of close friends. The cosmopolitan campus population brought me friends from such countries as Haiti, Kenya, Japan, Mexico and Romania. Some of them I have kept in touch with over the years as they have become notable alumni doing amazing work for God. One of my fellow alumni whom I am very proud to call a dear friend is Mark Sigue. He is now sharing the light of Christ's ministry as the children's pastor of the Sligo Seventh-Day Adventist Church on the campus of Washington Adventist University (formerly Columbia Union College) in Takoma Park, Md. He has also helped to spread the gospel to such beautiful destinations as Uganda and the Philippines, our mutual home country.

I earned a Bachelor of Science in journalism and mass media with a minor in behavioral sciences in 1998. My love of writing, working with people from all professions and nationalities, and traveling the world while spreading the word of God was only possible with the quality Christian education I obtained at Andrews.

My love of travel and serving the Lord has taken me to places as culturally diverse as Malaysia and as enchantingly exotic as India. I will always be grateful to Andrews for helping open up the globe for me and showing me that God's world is worth exploring and understanding.

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Wendell Gaa (BS '98) currently works as a diplomat for the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs in Manila.

### What's your story?

We'd love to hear your reflections on the time you spent at Andrews University. If you're interested in contributing, please e-mail [focus@andrews.edu](mailto:focus@andrews.edu).